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Scholarly investigation of diplomatic relations among kingdoms and principalities during the 12th and 13th century often has focused on the long-term interests of rulers and their efforts to undertake policy initiatives in pursuit of these interests. This approach has the benefit of allowing scholars to present a coherent narrative of events, clearly explaining cause and effect based upon a thorough analysis of the range of options open to a ruler, and the consequences of the choices that he made. In her study of diplomatic and political relations among Scotland, England, France, and Wales in the period between King John’s loss of Normandy and King Edward I’s first invasion of Scotland, Melissa Pollock has sought to change the focus from rulers to aristocrats, particularly those who held lands in one or more of the realms in Britain as well as in the French kingdom. In doing so, Pollock largely accepts the prevailing historiographical traditions concerning the decisiveness of the French conquest of Normandy in 1204 in forcing Anglo-Norman families, in effect, to choose sides between the English and French kings. However, she argues that aristocratic families still sought, sometimes successfully, to maintain extensive properties in several realms, even as their rulers were in conflict with each other. As a corollary to this argument, Pollock avers that it was pressure exerted by and connections offered by these trans-regnal aristocratic families that shaped, in large part, relations among the rulers of France, England, Scotland, and Wales.

Following a brief introduction, Pollock divides the book into five chronologically organized chapters. The first focuses on the decade after 1204, and the relationship between King John and Scotland, with a focus on the role played by the Scottish court in providing a refuge to magnates who had fallen afoul of the English ruler. A consistent theme in the chapter is John’s significant failure as a politician, and the exploitation of these weaknesses by King Philip II of France. Overall, Pollock provides a relatively clear discussion of the policies pursued by the French ruler, but the intentions of John and the Scottish kings, William I and Alexander II, remain obscure in this narrative. In place of this court-centered narrative, Pollock highlights the horizontal relationships among aristocrats with lands in England, Scotland, and in some cases, France as well.

In chapter two, which ostensibly treats the role of Scotland in the baronial revolt against King John in
1215–1216, Pollock continues to trace the familial ties and travel of Anglo-Norman lords in an effort to explain the relationships of rebels against John to landed aristocrats in Wales, Scotland, and to the French court. Pollock also argues that King John’s diplomatic initiatives also should be understood in the context of his relationships with loyal Anglo-Norman magnates. Consistent with her focus on the role played by aristocrats in royal diplomatic policy, Pollock also argues that the decision by Alexander II to join the alliance against King John is to be explained by the presence of numerous Anglo-Norman aristocrats at the Scottish court.

Chapter three considers the period following the end of the baronial revolt in 1217 up through the death in 1237 of Joan, the sister of King Henry III of England, the wife of King Alexander II of Scotland since 1221. Pollock provides a rapid overview of factional politics in England during Henry III’s minority, which ended in 1226, and the gradual break-down in peaceful relations between Scotland and England following Henry III’s assumption of full royal powers. Once again, the focus is on the role played by aristocratic families in facilitating positive diplomatic relations, and subsequently on the establishment of a military alliance between Scotland and Wales in 1233.

The fourth chapter treats the period 1238 to 1249, which encompasses King Alexander II’s second marriage to the French noblewoman Marie de Coucy up through his death and the accession of Alexander III’s minority government. Pollock argues that Alexander II used the newly reinvigorated connections with the French court brought by his marriage to strengthen his position vis-à-vis Henry III of England, and particularly with respect to the claims of the English king to overlordship in Scottish secular and ecclesiastical affairs. She also observes that both Alexander II and Henry III harbored the political enemies of the other ruler.

In the fifth chapter, Pollock traces out the initially improving diplomatic and political relationship between England and Scotland during Alexander III’s minority, with a particular emphasis on the young Scottish king’s marriage to Margaret, Henry III’s daughter. It is during this period, according to Pollock, that the Franco-Scottish relationship became dormant. However, in Pollock’s narrative, the political disruptions in England brought about by Henry III’s misrule, the barons’ war, the accession of Edward I in 1272, the death of Margaret in 1275, and the death of Alexander III in 1286 without any direct heirs, had the ultimate result of reviving the interest of the Scots in renewing their alliance with the French. The formal treaty between the Scots and the French in 1295, Pollock argues, was rested on a fundamentally different basis than the informal agreements in the early 13th century because it was based on specific national interest rather than on the parochial interests of aristocrat pressure groups at court. The volume concludes with a brief reiteration of the main points raised in the five chapters.
The text is equipped with a substantial apparatus of notes, which draw the reader’s attention to the very broad range of sources used by Pollock in this text. These include a number of unpublished documents from Scottish, English, and French archives, as well as the published narrative and administrative accounts from the 13th century. Missing are unpublished administrative documents from the reigns of Henry III and Edward I that shed light on the diplomatic initiatives undertaken by these kings. Pollock casts a broad net with regard to the secondary literature treating aristocratic affairs in the 13th century, but is missing some important scholarly works such as Adrian Jobson’s essential «The First English Revolution: Simon de Montfort, Henry III, and the Barons’ War», that illuminate the complex diplomacy among Henry III, Louis IX of France, and the English barons, particularly Simon de Montfort.

Overall, Pollock offers a wealth of genealogical information regarding a large number of aristocratic families that pursued their interests in France, England, Scotland, and even Wales. However, in her effort to refocus diplomatic and political relations through the prism of aristocratic interests, Pollock all too often leads the reader through a mass of detail concerning marriages, property exchanges, and inheritances that obscures the narrative to a great extent. In addition, Pollock all too often leaves the reader without any clear indication of the interests of kings and princes, or the ways in which they pursued their diplomatic and political initiatives. As a consequence, Pollock leaves the impression that the royal policy was determined solely by the presence or absence of aristocrats in court who had property interests in more than one kingdom. This volume certainly will be of interest to specialists in aristocratic history during the 13th century. However, it offers a difficult slog to non-specialists and will not be of use to students, even those at the advanced graduate level.